

# When Missouri football players join protest, a president resigns

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Members of black student protest group Concerned Student 1950 hold hands following the announcement that University of Missouri System President Tim Wolfe would resign Nov. 9, 2015, at the university in Columbia, Mo. Photo: AP/Jeff Roberson

COLUMBIA, Mo. — University of Missouri football player J'Mon Moore decided it was time to visit the protesters. The angry students were camped out in tents on a campus plaza, and they refused to leave. They were demanding the university pay attention to their complaints about growing racism at the school.

The university's problems began months earlier, after several black students said racist insults had been yelled at them. Many black students said racism was increasing at the school and that they no longer felt safe.

Many students soon grew angry at the school's president, Tim Wolfe, who they said was not doing enough to address the problem. Their anger boiled over into protest after Wolfe had police arrest several black students who were trying to speak with him. The tent city went up and a black student named Jonathan Butler went on a hunger strike. Butler declared he would not eat until Wolfe had stepped down.

After talking to the tent city protestors, Moore decided he had to get more involved. When he got home, he told his roommate and Tigers teammate, Anthony Sherrills, that he wanted to do something to support Butler.

Moore and Sherrills then spoke to teammates Ian Simon and Charles Harris. Soon, the push to support Butler began to spread. By Saturday night, the players were in front of their coach, declaring they wanted to go on strike until the president was gone.

### **Players Said They Wouldn't Practice Or Play**

Later that night, the protest began. Thirty black members of the football team released a statement that said they would not play or practice until the president was out of office. The players also tweeted a photo of themselves linking arms with Butler.

On Sunday, coach Gary Pinkel joined them and said the other coaches were all behind the players as well.

"I'm talking to guys who have tears in their eyes and they're crying," Pinkel said. "And they asked me if I'd support them, and I said I would."

Pinkel said he did not think about what might happen to him and the team. "It was about helping my players," he said, "and supporting my players when they needed me."

By Monday the president was gone, and the team had earned itself a place in history.

### **Scholarships Were At Risk**

The players wanted "to make a difference and stand behind Jonathan," Moore said.

By refusing to play, the athletes risked losing the scholarships that cover the expense of attending the school. However, stripping the players of their scholarships would have been a risky move for the athletic department. In the short-term, the Tigers' lineup would have been gutted with three more games to play this season. The remaining players would have faced humiliating losses and possible injuries.

In addition, some angry players would have transferred to other schools, and it would have become harder to get good new players to join the team. Missouri football would have been set back for years.

The university would have lost a lot of money if the players' strike had gone on for too long. To begin with, the school would have had to pay out more than \$1 million if an upcoming game against Brigham Young University had been cancelled.

## **They Have The Power**

The Tigers who were on strike have long been very important to efforts to raise money for the school. Many former students donate to the school in large part because of their loyalty to the football team. The players who went on strike are popular and well-known, and their faces and names have been used in many fund-raising campaigns.

"These black football players understood that they have the power," said Professor Shaun Harper, an expert on race and education. "That is so rare. I don't know another class of black people on a university campus that has as much power as these guys. ... Not in our modern history have we seen black students collectively flex their muscle in this way."

Sixty-three percent of Missouri's football and men's basketball players are black, even though the students overall are mostly white.

Most black student-athletes are not aware of their power to bring about change, Harper said.

"Hopefully, this situation raises their consciousness," he said. If black student-athletes elsewhere "do what these guys just did, it could be a form of activism" that would greatly help all black students, Harper added.

## **They Had To Do Something**

Following Wolfe's departure, the striking football players gathered with other students to celebrate. Speaking for his team members, Simon said that as "fellow concerned students," the players all felt they had to do something.

The players wanted to take a position "on an issue that has special meaning as a fellow black man's life was on the line," Simon said. "We love the game, but at the end of the day, it is just that — a game."

The success of the players strike should be a lesson "to all of the athletes across the country that you do have power," Harris said. "It started with a few individuals on our team, and look what it's become — look where it's at right now."